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Spring 2009  
ECLS Comps

Exile in modernity: the localized dislocation of Charles Baudelaire's *Le Cygne*

The word *exile* is a complicated one; exile can be understood as a state of being, the consequence of a political decision, or a social construction. Furthermore, exile is often understood as the result of relations of power or force, but is not necessarily divorced from the notion of choice. Its literary treatment ranges from the depiction of exile in fiction to the so-called literature of exile which has blossomed over the past century. But what of the poetics of exile? In his celebrated work *Le Cygne*, Charles Baudelaire orchestrates a literary representation of exile which evokes the philosophical treatment of the subject by his contemporaries and anticipates its treatment by the writers of today, and this representation comes to characterize the very experience of modernity.

*Le Cygne*, one of Baudelaire's most studied works, is a fifty-two line poem divided into two parts. It was first published in the second edition of *Fleurs du mal*, released in 1861, as an inclusion in the new *Tableaux parisiens* section. In his poem, Baudelaire presents a virtual encyclopedia of exiled figures, from the poet himself to legends of mythical proportions. The work is dedicated, quite pointedly, to Victor Hugo, who at the time was living and writing as a political outcast on the channel island of Guernsey. Even then regarded as an intellectual giant in Parisian circles, Hugo's name became inextricably associated with exile, a fact of which Baudelaire was keenly aware (Laforque 105). In a letter dated the 7 of December, 1859 Baudelaire sent Hugo a copy of *Le Cygne*, writing: "Voici des vers faits pour vous et en pensant à vous" (Laforque 105). This letter thus designates the poem's subject and intended recipient as one and the same: Hugo, or exile embodied.

Hugo's response to *Le Cygne* is equally illuminative. His letter to Baudelaire, dated the 18 of December, 1860, states:

“Comme tout ce que vous faites, monsieur, votre *Cygne* est une idée. Comme toutes les idées vraies, il a des profondeurs. Ce cygne dans la poussière a sous lui plus d'abîmes que le cygne des eaux sans fond du lac de Gaube. Ces abîmes, on les entrevoit dans vos vers pleins d'ailleurs de frissons et de tressaillements. La muraille du brouillard, la douleur comme une bonne louve, cela dit tout et plus que tout. Je vous remercie de ces strophes si pénétrantes et si fortes ” (Laforgue 106).

Hugo views *Le Cygne* as an idea in and of itself rather than as a mere text. Furthermore, he perceives this idea to be rooted in truth and profundity, and thus endows it with a certain undeniable essentiality. The poem not only articulates “tout et plus que tout,” but also crosses into the realm of experience, as its verses are filled with “frissons” and “tressaillements.” It is both expressive and penetrative, an intimate address which nevertheless implicates the universal. Hugo's letter marks Baudelaire's work as a sort of active writing, one which encompasses a particular experience, namely that of exile.

This reading of *Le Cygne* as a writing of exile is informed by a certain understanding of the thematics of exile in a larger sense. Both Victor Hugo and Giorgio Agamben construct exile as an unavoidable facet of the human condition, internal to the political as such. These two viewpoints, articulated in separate centuries by vastly different thinkers, also identify displacement as a hallmark of exile, be it physical or temporal. However, this displacement takes place in a specific space, which for Baudelaire is both the world of the modern metropolis and the space of memory. Walter Benjamin's work on spatial relations and movement patterns in modernity, as well as his reflections on Baudelaire's poetry, further complicate the concept of exile, and the urban wanderer replaces the image of a solitary figure trekking through a desert or lost at sea. Alienation, dislocation, and a certain intimacy with

the space of pathos mark the exile as he is understood here, both in the primary text and related works of theory.

To begin then, a close reading of the work itself is necessary to expose the relevant issues found in *Le Cygne*. Three main figures dominate the poem: Andromache, captive and kidnapped; the swan, yearning for his native lake; and an immigrant woman, searching for the palm fronds of her native Africa. Various other images of exile appear as well, be they famed individuals or symbols of the universal, for “*Le Cygne* takes shape and substance through a series of dynamic patterns or allegories, each of which illustrates and defines in its own way the dominant idea of exile” (Babuts 123). Baudelaire opens the work with a cry of “Andromaque, je pense à vous!” (Line 1). Married to the Trojan warrior Hector, Andromache “lost her husband, was carried into captivity by Pyrrhus, and eventually had to marry Helenus, himself a slave” (Babuts 128). The poet’s cry echoes the cry of Andromache herself upon learning of her husband’s death in Homeric lore (Frank 257). A classic, noble heroine, Andromache serves as the embodiment of mourning, and her mourning encompasses the sense of terminal loss that accompanies exile. She thus serves as the catalytic image which opens the floodgates of the poet’s memory.

A sense of tragic grandeur characterizes Baudelaire’s Andromache, whose nobility is accentuated by its loss. The reader and the poet are immediately awed by “l’immense majesté de vos [Andromaque’s] douleurs de veuve” (Line 3) as reflected by the stream acting as a “pauvre et triste miroir” (Line 2) in the poem’s opening. This stream becomes a charged image, its import heightened by its ambiguity. Next described as a “Simois menteur qui par vos [Andromaque’s] pleurs grandit” (Line 4), the river is dislocated, and it is unclear precisely

where or when it is. Although it resembles the grand Simois of Troy, it is an imposter, and is possibly the recreated Simois of Andromache's exile. However, it is simultaneously a Parisian stream into which the speaker gazes; in fact, some critics have argued that it is the Seine itself (Elkins 3). The river's reflections feed the poet's reflections, for it has fed upon Andromache's tears and in turn "a fécondé soudain ma [the poet's] mémoire fertile" (Line 5). Andromache's exile, like Hugo's, is a productive one. As outcasts both attain a martyr-like status, serving a representational and inspirational function for the poet. Just as Hugo authored many of his most celebrated works at Guernsey, the poet finds a certain aesthetic and philosophical profundity in Andromache's exile, for although her image haunts him, it also unleashes the stream of images which give shape to the poem.

Andromache reappears within the poem's second half, in which the poet dedicates a stanza to thoughts of her life as a captive. The poet laments her fallen state, as she has been lost "des bras d'un grand époux" (Line 37) and is now no more than a "vil bétail" (Line 38). The stark contrast between her noble origins and her current state highlights the extremity of her condition. As "veuve d'Hector, hélas! et femme d'Hélénus" (Line 40) Andromache's impotence in the face of tragedy is evident. Her status as widow both consecrates her to the realm of the past, alienating her from the present moment, and defines her in terms of loss and lack. She is now trapped "in a futureless present, caught between the memory of a hero and the immediacy of a pale substitute with whom she is condemned to live out her days" (Hampton 443). Her existence is as empty and futile as the "tombeau vide" next to which she is "en extase courbée" (Line 39), and she is deprived even of a real grave to grieve upon as a displaced person. Consecrated to the past, separated from all hope, and inhabiting the

widow's space of emptiness, Andromache must live out her days in both physical and temporal exile.

The title figure of the poem, the swan, is the second searing image of exile which appears in the work. The poet recalls walking through Haussmann's Paris, caught up in the throes of its continuing redesign, and stumbling upon a swan, "qui s'était évadé de sa cage" (Line 17). Although physically free from constraint, the swan cannot escape his manufactured alienation. Reinforced by images such as "le sol raboteux" (Line 19) and "le pavé sec" (Line 18), an oppressive aridness surrounds the great bird. This aridness then parlays itself into an expression of emptiness and loss, as the poet sees "près d'un ruisseau sans eau la bête ouvrant le bec/Baignait nerveusement ses ailes dans la poudre" (Lines 20-21). Like Andromache, bent over an empty tomb, the swan inhabits a space of lack, which here also manifests itself as a lack of agency as the swan beats its wings futilely. Furthermore, the swan yearns for that which is not present, with "le coeur plein de son beau lac natal" (Line 22). He too is alienated from the place and time in which he finds himself, and once again the poet contrasts his figure's idealized origin and current, lamentable condition.

The poet takes care to situate the swan in a position of ambiguity. The swan is both a memory and a "mythe étrange et fatal" (Line 24) and thus is consecrated to the past, the unreliability of memory, and the realm of imagination. As such, the swan is separated from the real, cut off even from any experience of reality. In placing his swan "vers le ciel quelquefois... vers le ciel ironique et cruellement bleu" (Lines 25-26) the poet creates a boundless expanse in which self-location is impossible. The swan is at once wandering a desert and lost at sea, consumed by literal and figurative thirst. However, his is a distinctively

urban desert, for he has not strayed far from his “ménagerie” (Line 13) and struggles on the dry pavement. Exiled to the city, the swan is trapped in the frightening expanse of the metropolis, surrounded by the unfamiliar and the hostile.

As he does with Andromache, the poet reintroduces the swan during the second half of the poem, but only briefly. He then abruptly inserts a new figure for the reader’s consideration: la négresse. The insertion is jarring, as la négresse is neither a mythical heroine nor a fragment of memory. She is, rather, very much a present reality, but her grounding in the current moment does not allow her to escape the poem’s circle of exile. Again an image of loss, she is a pitiful figure, “amaigrie et phtisique/Piétant dans la boue” (Lines 41-42) without destination, weighed down in literal and metaphorical muck and mire. She is also, in the most literal of senses, an exile, as she walks “cherchant, l’œil haggard,/Les cocotiers absent de la superbe Afrique” (Lines 42-43). Alone and forgotten in a foreign land, she is nearly invisible, more of a specter than a person. For her, Paris is not a city of wonders but a realm of horrors to which she has been abandoned. And she is deprived even of her physical locality in a sense, lost “derrière la muraille immense du brouillard” (44) that is at once a barrier and an expanse. She is without a doubt the most political of the poem’s images, and as such is perhaps also the most compelling of the work’s figures.

In addition to the three standout figures, *Le Cygne* is replete with depictions of the abandoned, the forgotten, and the exiled. As discussed, the poem is dedicated to Victor Hugo, the archetypal image of an intellectual living in exile as a political consequence. Ovid is mentioned in line 25, and provides a classical foreshadowing of Hugo’s fate, for the Roman writer experienced political banishment as well. The poet also references “les exilés, ridicules

and sublimes” (Line 35) who are “rongé d’un désir sans trêve” (Line 36), and these lines at once expand upon and encompass the poem’s already established figures. The work also pays homage to “maigres orphelins séchant comme des fleurs” (Line 48) and whose status, much like Andromache’s status as a widow, is defined by loss. As thin as la négresse and as thirst-ridden as the swan, they are aestheticized in much the same way as the poem’s three cardinal figures, and are described as delicate flowers. The poem ends on a dedicatory and almost elegiac note, as the poet remarks, “je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une ile,/Aux captifs, aux vaincus!... à bien d’autres encore!” (Lines 51-52). Exile multiplies as the poet acknowledges the scope of its influence in his final words, and indeed populates the work as a whole.

The poet himself is a powerful symbol of loss and desire, as he “places himself in the circle of his characters” (Babuts 130). He speaks from “la forêt où mon esprit s’exile” (Line 49) in response to “un vieux Souvenir” that “sonne à plein soufflé de cor” (Line 50). A refugee from the past, he dwells in fragments of memory and myth, unable to reconcile himself with a new reality. He laments that “le vieux Paris n’est plus” (Lines 7), but even more so bemoans the fact that “la forme d’une ville change plus vite, hélas! que le cœur d’un mortel” (Lines 7-8). Adrift among what was once his home, but is now “le bric-à-brac confus” (Line 12), the poet gives himself over to the equally confused jumble of his memory. Change is not a positive for the poet, as he himself cannot change and “rien dans ma mélancolie n’a bougé” (Line 29). He is trapped by his very thoughts, for his “chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs” (Line 32). Weighed down by the memories of a past which he can never recapture, he is in this sense identical to the figures that haunt his imagination.



Standing in front of the Louvre, an illustrious image here turned to a symbol of loss, his dislocation is complete, as he fails to inhabit the new Paris and chooses instead to wander through the depths of his memory.

Baudelaire begins to establish this notion of the exiled being by carefully situating each of his characters as such and then establishes exile as the dominant theme of his work by uniting his disparate figures. He takes great pains to link his three primary figures, who form a triptych of related images. He begins by connecting Andromaque and the swan, who dominate the first half of the work. He immediately links the two through his use of the word “jadis” (Lines 2 & 13), marking them as creatures who inhabit the past both literally and figuratively. Like Andromache, who cannot recapture her life with Hector, the swan is “a vision of a lost past that has been covered over by a new and different present in the form of the new Carrousel” (Elkins 6). Furthermore, the dry stream which tortures the swan parallels the empty grave over which Andromache mourns. Both are devoid of their definitive elements; the stream has no water, and the tomb houses no body. Additionally, Andromache and the swan “are united in the irony of their non-liberation. Andromache’s deliverance from Pyrrhus to Helenus offers as little solace as the swan’s escape from a cage to a dry stream” (Hampton 444). In a further irony, the water which mocks Andromache as a “pauvre est triste miroir” (Line 2) is that which the swan so fervently desires. Finally, the poet places the two on the same level by elevating the swan to Andromache’s legendary status. Despite his groundings in reality, the swan becomes a “mythe étrange et fatal” (Line 24), as untouchable as Andromache herself.

In the second half of the poem, the poet's vision of the African woman is layered upon the already overlapping depictions of Andromache and the swan. The three are conjured up in a fluid stream of thought, which begins with the poet exclaiming "Je pense à mon grand cygne [...] comme les exilés, ridicule et sublime/Et rongé d'un désir sans trêve! et puis à vous,/Andromaque" (Lines 34-37). This single yet compound thought reaches its peak when the poet suddenly interjects "Je pense à la negresse" (41). Their situations do indeed parallel each other; just as the African woman yearns in vain for "la superbe Afrique" (Line 43), the swan exhibits a "coeur plein de son beau lac natal" (Line 22). Moreover, the "pied palmés" (Line 18) of the swan bring to mind the "cocotiers absents" (Line 43) of the African woman. Even Andromache is removed from her native Troy, and thus the three become one image of nostalgia, loss, and impotent grief. All have been driven nearly mad by their suffering, but what binds them is "their refusal to submit to the new reality that oppresses them and distorts their aspirations" (Babuts 123). Furthermore, all three exhibit an adversarial relationship with elements of nature. A river of sorrow reflects and magnifies Andromache's grief, a stream bed turned to dust tortures the swan, and a quagmire of mud and fog entraps the African woman. They are glorified images "imbued with a mythic aura" (Frank 258), whose immense grief lends them a sense of greatness. They thus become "la série paradigmatique du vide, de l'absence, du manqué, de l'exil" (Laforgue 105). United by endless sorrow, futile searches, and complete displacement, these three individual symbols form a single, transcendent persona.

The unifying "Je pense à" construction likewise lends a key element to the construction of Baudelaire's poem. The construction recurs four times, in lines 1, 34, 41, and

51, and is implied in lines 36, 45, and 48. The objects of the phrase are, respectively, Andromache, the swan, the African woman, and the forgotten sailors, captives, and “autres.” In fact, the construction is implied in the poem’s dedication, “À Victor Hugo.” As Laforgue argues, “ce n’est pas une coïncidence qui tiendrait à l’emploi de l’expression ‘penser à’ et à celui de la préposition ‘à’ suivie du nom du dédicataire. Au contraire, tout laisse à croire que la démarche de Baudelaire était parfaitement concertée” (Laforgue 105). The same phrase thus begins and ends the poem, as well as inhabiting the body of the work. The ambiguity of the construction is striking, for it is at once apostrophic and descriptive. The poet both addresses the figures and thinks of or about them; he is thus both engaged and disengaged with their reality. The poem is therefore not a simple rumination on the condition of exile; it is, rather, an address from exile, to exile, about exile. And Baudelaire posits his own definition of exile and the exiled, as those ridiculous and sublime beings consumed by a never-ending desire, who have lost what can never be regained (“jamais, jamais!”) (Lines 35-36 and 45-46). Loss, dislocation, and displacement result in yearning, a yearning which, for Baudelaire, becomes the experience of exile.

This alienation through dislocation, which in the poem is experienced as both physical and temporal, seems a straightforward enough hallmark of exile. However, there is a paradoxical dimension to this displacement, for Baudelaire’s poem is in fact located with extreme specificity to the streets of Paris. Presented as one of many *Tableaux parisiens*, the poem features four direct references to its locality, with a mention of the Carrousel (Line 6), a reference to the Louvre (Line 33), and two inclusions of the city name (Lines 7 and 29). But it is not in spite of this precise locality that the displacement occurs, but in fact because of it.

The agent of the poet's alienation is his very localization, for he cannot accept "le nouveau" and yearns instead for "le vieux Paris" (Lines 6, 7). Thus it is only in Paris, the site of his temporal exile, where he can recognize exile in others. The second stanza begins because "Paris change!" (Line 29). And as a refugee from the past the poet finds communion with refugees of other sorts. It is no accident that "devant ce Louvre une image m'opprime:/ Je pense à mon grand cygne" (Lines 33-34). The poet and his likenesses must occupy the same space of exile, and therefore their dislocation is uniquely localized to Paris.

The various critical writings, then, on and of Baudelaire and his city become relevant to a reading of *Le Cygne*. The poet of *Le Cygne* is, in many ways, indistinguishable from the figure of the *flâneur*, whose relationship with the city of Paris is based on an ever-shifting reality. The *flâneur* is an urban wanderer, first theorized by Baudelaire and hence in a way irremovable from a Parisian setting. In his essay *Le peintre de la vie moderne* Baudelaire identifies the *flâneur* as "l'homme des foules" (5), referencing Edgar Allen Poe's celebrated tale titled "The Man in the Crowd." For the *flâneur*, "sa passion et sa profession, c'est d'épouser la foule. Pour le parfait flâneur, pour l'observateur passionné, c'est une immense jouissance que d'élire domicile dans le nombre, dans l'ondoyant, dans le mouvement, dans le fugitif et l'infini" (6). He is "constantly moving with the city itself" (Blanchard 82), simultaneously participating in and portraying the life of the city. However because he is an observer the *flâneur* is never a full participant, for his role is instead "voir le monde, être au centre du monde et rester caché au monde" (6). He therefore experiences a simultaneous intimacy with and alienation from the urban crowd as he moves through the city, seeing but never seen, centered but never static.

This ceaseless movement creates an effect of displacement even as the *flaneur* aligns himself with Paris and Parisians. But because of the fluid intangibility of the *flaneur*'s experience, "the city is never real. It is more like a series of pictures or vignettes" (Blanchard 74). The Paris of *Le Cygne*, which takes form through such a series of images, therefore constitutes a necessarily disjointed reality. The crowded city becomes a projection, a reflection of the *flaneur* himself. Baudelaire writes of the *flaneur*, "on peut aussi le comparer, lui, à un miroir aussi immense que cette foule" (7), bringing to mind immediately Andromache's false Simois, that "pauvre et triste miroir" (Line 2) in which the poet sees reflected the many figures which populate his work and his city. And,

"what brings the place into consciousness is the fact that the encounter with the people in the place makes it different in reality from what it was supposed to be on paper, if only because the individual assertion of this presence by every single one of those people in it negates- better, *demand*s- the negation of a place for others, and with this negation, the negation of all other people. Thus the city is truly the negation, we must assume, we must take on, not by dealing with it, not by trying to make sense out of the chaos (Engels) but by espousing the anonymity, the disconnection it suggests by losing ourselves in its midst" (Blanchard 75).

Just as the poem is populated by creatures defined by lack or loss, its setting is understood through negation rather than assertion. And each inhabitant of the poem, including the poet himself, appears to be concerned primarily with where he or she is not rather than where he or she is. Paris, then, acts as the place of displacement, and as such provides an adequate space for the formation of an imagined community of exiles, where "tout pour moi devient allegorie" (Line 31).

*Le Cygne* presents the reader with both the experience of the exiled and the experience of the *flaneur*, which may in fact be one and the same. The poet speaks "comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel" (Line 6), at once marking his location yet designating himself as

unfixed in space. His cataloguing of figures then commences, but “those appearing are types. Never does the *flâneur* know them personally. He recreates a picture of the encounter he has had with them, sometimes long after the real individuals have vanished” (Blanchard 77). *Le Cygne* is famously allegorical, which must be the case when the speaker is also the *flâneur*. And although the *flâneur* may exist in the present moment, the “*flâneur-poet*” is an altogether different creature. For “the *flâneur-poet*, overwhelmed by the appearance of the characters, will then wrestle with his memory of the encounter and attempt to regain control of what possessed him so” (Blanchard 81). As a result, it is inevitable that “this past be perceived as the present of the *flâneur*, who is ready to depart from tradition to look for appearances and beginnings and whose memory of a single event may take on, and in some cases, negate, a whole tradition with the narrative of a single ‘happening’” (Blanchard 84), which is precisely the case in *Le Cygne*. Furthermore, as Blanchard comments with *Le Cygne* specifically in mind, “this association of ideas and images only leads back to himself [the poet], the ultimate ‘exile’” (85). The *flâneur* becomes the embodiment of the urban exile at home, who expresses his alienation by associating himself with figures past and present who share in yet are equally resistant to occupying his city-space.

As the urban drifter, the *flâneur*’s existence is a manifestation of the modern, a relationship which Baudelaire himself suggests in writing that the *flâneur* is compelled to wander because “il cherche ce quelque chose qu’on nous permettra d’appeler la *modernité*” (8). The *flâneur* thus becomes inextricably linked to the concept of modernity, particularly in its usage and treatment by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, who wrote extensively on both the development of Paris and the life and work of Baudelaire, examined both the artistic and the social through a quasi-Marxist lens, often blending the two. In his introduction to Benjamin’s

collected essays on Baudelaire, Michael W. Jennings argues that Benjamin treats the French poet as not only as “the representative writer of urban capitalist modernity,” but in fact as “as the first fully modern writer” (1). Jennings’s rationale for such an argument lies in his assertion that “for Benjamin [...] Baudelaire’s greatness consisted precisely in his *representativeness*: in the manner in which his poetry- often against its express intent- laid open the structure and mechanisms of his age” (1). Baudelaire’s work thus resembles that of the *flâneur*, exposing his surroundings as they are in the moment he experiences them. “In the period in which he lived, nothing came closer to the ‘task’ of the ancient hero- to the ‘labors’ of a Hercules- than the task imposed upon him as his very own: to give shape to modernity” (Benjamin 110). And, more often than not in Baudelaire’s work, modernity takes shape through his depictions of the crowded city.

However, in both Benjamin’s essays and Baudelaire’s poetry, the modern urban space is one of alienation and isolation. As a result of Haussman’s renovation of Paris, Baudelaire witnessed “the transformation of the boulevard into an *interieur*. The street becomes a dwelling place for the *flâneur*” (Benjamin 68), who begins to live in transition. Location becomes impossible, for as Jennings observes, “in the crowded streets of the urban metropolis, the individual is not merely absorbed into the masses: all traces of individual existence are in fact effaced” (13). Just as the poet of *Le Cygne* seeks to assert himself and understand his exile by representing the exile of others, “the flâneur only seems to break through this ‘unfeeling isolation of each within his private concerns,’ by filling the hollow space created in him by such isolation with the borrowed- and fictitious- isolations of strangers” (Benjamin 88). Both disappear: the *flâneur* into the crowded city, the poet into his equally crowded imaginings. The space of the city gives way to the space of the poem, for as

Jennings explains the “relational character of poetic language, its deployment of such stratagems as spacing and displacement, its ‘calculated disharmony between the image and the object’ mark Baudelaire as an allegorist. And within the linguistic spaces so opened, Benjamin saw the experience of the utter meaninglessness of the modern world might arise” (18). Spaces of modernity, for both Baudelaire and Benjamin, become the spaces in which location is impossible and isolation is inevitable.

Returning, then, to the poem’s setting, Paris must once again be considered in all of its contradictory locality. For Benjamin, Baudelaire is irremovable from his Parisian environment. In a chapter titled “Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris,” which is prefaced with Line 31 of *Le Cygne*, Benjamin writes:

“Baudelaire’s genius, which is nourished on melancholy, is an allegorical genius. For the first time, with Baudelaire, Paris becomes the subject of lyric poetry. This poetry is no hymn to the homeland; rather, the gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the alienated man. It is the gaze of the *flâneur*, whose way of life still conceals behind a mitigating nimbus the coming desolation of the big-city dweller. The *flâneur* still stands on the threshold- of the metropolis as of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet. In neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd [...] The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city beckons to the *flâneur* as phantasmagoria- now a landscape, now a room” (Benjamin 40).

Benjamin’s *flâneur* is a product of modernity isolated from the modern. He seeks to know the city, yet is endlessly alienated by its ever-changing state, its very unknowability. His participation is through observation; he is a part of and yet aloof from the crowd. He is thus both inside of and removed from the metropolis, perceiving the city as an allegorical space. And he must bear “the traces of the ‘heartache and the thousand natural shocks’ which a pedestrian suffers in the bustle of a city” (Benjamin 91). A city-dweller most at home in the



streets, the *flaneur* is a creature of lack or of loss, much like *Le Cygne*'s poet and his reflections.

This crisis of modernity, embodied by the *flaneur*, is readily evident in the text of *Le Cygne*. The poet's alienation from the present and desire for the past has been established already in this paper; however, there is additional tension which makes itself felt in the poem. There is an omnipresent conflict between the new and the old, and an insistence upon memory and origin. The "nouveau Carrousel" (Line 6) and "palais neufs" (Line 30) are placed in opposition with the "vieux Paris" (Line 7) and "vieux faubourgs" (Line 31). Furthermore, the poet inserts specific references to each of his figures' places of origin, from Andromache's Simois (Line 4), to the swan's "beau lac natal" (Line 22), to the African woman's "cocotiers absents" (Line 43). Like the objects of his observation, the poet finds himself isolated from his place of origin, which now exists only as "un vieux Souvenir" (Line 50). Souvenir, or Memory, thus takes substance as a place, a capitalized proper noun. According to Benjamin, "it is no accident that *Le Cygne* is allegorical. The ever-changing city grows rigid. It becomes as brittle as glass [...] The condition of Paris is fragile; it is surrounded by symbols of fragility" who, as Benjamin points out, are both living creatures and historical figures (111). And "what they share are mourning for what was and lack of hope for what is to come. In the final analysis, this decrepitude constitutes the closest link between modernity and antiquity" (Benjamin 111). In a sense, the *flaneur* is caught between epochs; he is both a participant in the modern era of high capitalism, and an observer caught up in classical intellectualism and aestheticism.

Benjamin does not, however, neglect the physical aspect of exile, nor is he incognizant of its political implications. Benjamin himself spent several years as an expatriate fleeing the Nazi regime; until the fall of France, the majority of his self-imposed exile was spent in Paris as a stateless man. He is all too aware of the city as both a uniquely modern space of alienation and as a haven for the displaced, and muses on “emigration as a key to the big city” (149). It is due in part to his own experiences, perhaps, that for Benjamin “the urban scene traced out by the *fantastique escrime* of ‘Tableaux parisiens’ is no longer a homeland. It is a spectacle, a foreign place” (149). This foreign place, a place of and perhaps for foreigners, is simultaneously Baudelaire’s place of origin. But Benjamin argues that Baudelaire takes no solace in this, and instead consciously “estranges Parisians from their city. They no longer feel at home there, and start to become conscious of the inhuman character of the metropolis” (43). His readers are thus forced to experience Paris as he experiences it, as a place of exile-in-origin. It is also a place from which people are exiled, with Victor Hugo being the most notable example during Baudelaire’s time, a fact to which Benjamin makes frequent reference.

Benjamin’s posthumously published notes on Baudelaire contain the following musing: “Victor Hugo’s ‘Attendre c’est la vie: the wisdom of exile” (144). Baudelaire seemingly shared this opinion, for as mentioned above *Le Cygne* is dedicated to the famed Parisian thinker, and was published 9 years into Hugo’s 18-year exile from France. And Hugo’s own writings on exile further inform a reading of Baudelaire’s work, particularly in articulating dimensions of the political. His letters, essays, and ruminations on the political events between 1852 and 1870, the time he spent in political asylum abroad, are collectively

referred to as a single body of work titled *Actes et Paroles- Pendant l'Exil*. By Hugo's own design, the contents of the work are prefaced with an essay, written in 1875, which seeks to address "Ce que c'est l'exil." In many ways, this piece of philosophical prose, belonging to the same culture and era as *Le Cygne*, enacts much the same writing of exile that *Le Cygne* presents.

Exile, in part, implies the political, but implicates the intellectual. Hugo, situated at the crossroads between the political and the intellectual, begins his essay by offering two definitions: what exile as an act is, and what an exile as a being is. He states, "l'exil, c'est la nudité du droit" (16). It is therefore a condition essential to society, and perhaps to humanity as well. Exile is what remains of law once it is stripped, undressed, unadorned; exile is absolute exposure. He continues, "un homme tellement ruiné qu'il n'a plus que son honneur, tellement dépouillé qu'il n'as plus que sa conscience, tellement isolé qu'il n'a plus près de lui que l'équité, tellement renié qu'il na plus avec lui que la vérité, tellement jeté aux ténèbres qu'il ne lui reste plus que soleil, voilà ce que c'est qu'un proscrit" (17). The statement's negative phrasing emphasizes the exile's irreducible proximity to a state of loss. He has been divested of all identifying qualities other than his very essence, his very humanness. Hugo thus articulates the properties of (an) exile, providing a working definition applicable in both politics and literature.

This enumeration of the characteristics of exile brings to mind the population of *Le Cygne*. Andromache, the majestic widow of a fallen hero, could very well be "un homme [femme] tellement ruiné qu'il [elle] n'a plus que son honneur," attaining an untouchable nobility through disgrace. The African woman, then, becomes "tellement renié qu'il [elle] n'a plus avec lui [elle] que la vérité," disowned by society and abandoned to the bleakness of

reality. The swan further embodies a being “tellement jeté aux ténèbres qu’il ne lui reste plus que soleil,” bathing in the dust beneath an arid sky. And the poet himself is both “tellement dépouillé qu’il n’as plus que sa conscience, tellement isolé qu’il n’a plus près de lui que l’équité.” The word “conscience” in French is not necessarily the conscience of English, although the poet certainly exhibits a political conscience in his work. However, “conscience” could also be read as consciousness, and the poet does indeed present the reader with all that is left to him in the form of his thoughts, reflections, and words. As previously discussed, the poet takes care to place his varied figures on at the same level, even placing himself with them. He thus presents to the reader both his consciousness and those who surround him, figures whose shared condition necessitates their equity. Both Hugo and Baudelaire catalogue exile, endowing their exiled figure(s) with the same basic, bare, and essential characteristics.

As Hugo continues, his representation of exile further mirrors Baudelaire’s, and additionally calls to mind the figure of the *flâneur*. He writes, “tels sont les petits côtés de l’exil, voici les grands: Songer, penser, souffrir. Etre seul et sentir qu’on et avec tous [...] Ajoutez à cela le dévouement à la souffrance universelle” (27-28). Baudelaire’s poet indeed does little else but dream, think, and suffer, finding companions in his isolation who share in this uniquely human misery. In addition, Hugo remarks of the exile, “on croit qu’il fait des songes; non; il cherche la réalité. Disons plus, il la trouve” (28). But, as in the case of the *flâneur*, this reality remains unrecognized and unconfirmed, a reality built out of images and imaginings. Because like the *flâneur*, Hugo’s exile relies upon “sondages douloureux et utiles [...] Il rêve sans relâche. [...] Il regarde l’infini, il écoute l’ignoré. La grande voix sombre

lui parle. Toute la nature en foule s'offre à ce solitaire. Les analogies sévère l'enseignent et le conseillent" (29). He is, as the *flaneur* is so often described, "un homme chimerique" (40) and a man of the crowd, lost in its roar. And like Baudelaire's poet, like the *flaneur*, there is a paradoxical aspect to the placement of Hugo's exile. For although "l'exil n'est pas une chose matérielle, c'est un chose morale. Tous les coins de terre se valent" (17), Hugo cannot resist placing it as "le pays sévère" (18). Displaced yet located, and constructing a reality out of encounters with reflections, Hugo's exile walks the same streets as Baudelaire's *flaneur*-poet.

Hugo's essay, in fact, performs much the same function as Baudelaire's poem. Like *Le Cygne*, "Ce que c'est l'exil" is an address to exile, from exile, about exile. Hugo addresses his reader directly, often using the 'vous' construction and including his audience in the experience of exile, identifying the reader as "vous qui etes proscrit" (19). He simultaneously aligns himself with the reader, declaring "examinons" (40) and "voyons les faits" (40). This imperative construction is both a command and implies a united "we." Finally, he associates himself with his omnipresent, imagined, and ideal figure of the exile, identified throughout the work as "l'exil" or simply with the third-person pronoun "il." Hugo writes, "il ne finira pas ces pages, pourtant, sans dire que, durant cette longue nuit faite par l'exil, il n'a pas perdu de vue Paris un seul instant" (50). This pronoun shift, by which Hugo replaces his archetypal image of exile with his own image, occurs immediately after the only instance of the singular first-person in the essay, when Hugo interjects "je m'arrête. Laissez-moi me souvenir" (50). And so as in *Le Cygne*, memory, along with allegory and observation, functions to destabilize the individual and emphasize the universal and the essential, which for both Hugo and Baudelaire, is exile. Moreover, Hugo's ultimate rumination on exile cannot exclude

mention of Baudelaire's Paris, as he ends his essay with two full sections on the city, a fact which will be further elaborated upon shortly.

Returning to the intersection of the political and the aesthetic at which Hugo's essay is located, the figure of la négresse takes on increasing importance. The image of the tubercular African woman trudging through mud, perhaps on her way to work, is a portrait of the downtrodden laborer. Her pain is simultaneously ignored and exploited by society, and although perhaps not a slave in name, her life is a kind of slavery. Her very appearance in the poem is jolting, as the poet's winding reverie, made up of memory and myth, suddenly arrives upon this uncomfortably real and recognizable manifestation of modernity. As previously discussed, *Le Cygne* collapses the real and the allegorical, the individual and the universal, and so with the appearance of the African woman Baudelaire's poem is thrust into the realm of the political, and the entire work takes on an additional significance. But the poem, perhaps, inhabited a political space from the start, with the *flâneur*-poet caught as he is in the moment of modernization and the inception of the middle-class. This leads, then, back to the political dimension of Hugo, whose articulation of the state of exile brings to mind the even more modern philosophy of exile theorized by Giorgio Agamben.

Hugo's basic, preliminary assertion is, as discussed, that "l'exil c'est la nudité du droit" (16). In translation, this thought has been articulated as "exile is law laid bare" (Robinson 67), which brings immediately to mind the "bare life" of Giorgio Agamben, as set forth in his work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Agamben's incarnation of bare life, homo sacer, is perhaps the ultimate exile, for homo sacer is "he who may be killed but not sacrificed" (Agamben 8) and whose "human life is included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion" (Agamben 8). In a sense, he is excluded from humanity

itself, although this exclusion paradoxically serves to emphasize the very humanity which it denies. Because homo sacer is a figure of legal antiquity, it then follows that “the exception is the originary form of law” (Agamben 26). Agamben continues, “the relation of exception is a relation of ban. He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable” (Agamben 28). Therefore, “the originary relation of law to life is not application but Abandonment” (Agamben 29); or, “exile is law laid bare.” Agamben’s bare life is the product of Hugo’s bare law, and the two can be called by the same name: exile.

Looking further at Hugo’s essay, the argument for a relationship between his exile and Agamben’s homo sacer strengthens. For both Hugo and Agamben, there is a paradoxical relationship between the exiler and the exiled, the sovereign and the sacer. First, Hugo: “Le droit incarné, c’est le citoyen; le droit couronné, c’est le législateur” (15). The citizen is simply the lawmaker disrobed, and is thus both the origin and the victim of the law. In essence, the two share one experience, for “l’exil, c’est la nudité du droit. Rien de plus terrible. Pour qui ? Pour celui qui subit l’exil ? Non, pour celui qui l’inflige. Le supplice se retourne et mord le bourreau” (16). In engaging in the relation of exclusion, both parties are excluded, and the experience of exile is shared. As a result, “le proscripateur dispose de la qualité de proscriit” (20). And if the exile is he who must be warned “tout est permis contre vous ; vous êtes hors de loi” (19), then it holds that he who removed the exile from the law must also be somehow removed from the law. But Hugo warns as well that “on vous jette loin, mais on ne vous lache pas” (19) ; the exile is “hors la loi, dans le droit” (47). Hugo’s

exile, then, exists both inside and outside of the law, sharing his experience with he who exiled him.

This logic, alluded to by Hugo, is directly announced by Agamben. Drawing from Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty as "sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception" (Agamben 11), Agamben addresses "the paradox of sovereignty" which "consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order" (15). Otherwise articulated, "the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law" (15). He is, then, occupying the same space as *homo sacer*, for "there is a limit-figure of life, a threshold in which life is both inside and outside the juridical order, and this threshold is the place of the sovereign" (Agamben 27). The same question can be asked of him which Hugo asks of the exile: "Y meurt-il? Non, il y vit" (45). He, the sovereign and the exile, lives in this state because it is the societal state of origin, home to bare life, and bare law. There, in the state of exception, the state of exile, "il a été abandonné de tous et n'a abandonné personne" (Hugo 49). This abandonment, by and of the law, is the political experience of exile.

Omnipresent yet intangible, Agamben's state of exception is everywhere and nowhere at once. He does, however, locate it to a degree, when he appeals, "we must learn to recognize this structure of the ban in the political relations and public spaces in which we still live. In the city, the banishment of sacred life is more internal than every interiority and more external than every extraneousness" (Agamben 111). So it is in the city, the public space of modernity, that Agamben locates the state of exception. This may inform the fact that Hugo, rather surprisingly, ends his definition of what exile is with his reflections on his city of



origin: Paris. He puts forth the following: “Paris est la frontière de l’avenir. Frontière visible de l’inconnu. Toute la quantité de Demain qui peut être entrevue dans Aujourd’hui. C’est la Paris” (51). He presents Paris as a frontier, a border, a threshold. Borders, inevitably, imply the existence of a liminal space, a space which Agamben terms “a zone of irreducible indistinction” (Agamben 9). It is in such a zone of indistinction that exception occurs, and bare life exists. Paris then, the Paris of *Le Cygne*, comes to represent the state of exception.

Hugo’s Paris, in many ways, is reminiscent of Baudelaire’s Paris. In both works, the ideal Paris is the Paris of the past, the Paris of the author’s memory. Hugo, in exile, can only invoke Paris through the act of remembrance; likewise, Baudelaire must reconstruct his conception of the altered city. Hugo argues of Paris, “aucun milieu n’est plus vaste; aucune perspective n’est plus inquiétante et plus sublime” (51). This is the very Paris of Baudelaire, the city which elicits a never-ending stream of images “comme les exilés, ridicule et sublime” (Line 35). This sublimity is a manifestation, perhaps, of the status of Paris as the edge of modernity. “Qui cherche des yeux le Progrès, aperçoit Paris” (Hugo 51), and at no time is the advent of modernity announced more clearly than in the drastic redesign of the city which so alienates Baudelaire’s poet. The *flâneur*, that modern wanderer who loses himself to urbanity rather than to expanse, is produced by the particular circumstances of Paris itself. He experiences a dislocation from the real because he inhabits a dislocated locale, for “Paris, étant une idée autant qu’une ville, a l’ubiquité” (Hugo 52). It is everywhere; it is the experience of modernity.

*Le Cygne* must, therefore, occur in Paris, and not the Paris of anyone in any era. Only Baudelaire’s Paris can truly be inhabited by exile in the sense that has been discussed here.

Just as the figures of the poem differ, overlap, blend, and separate, acting and appearing at once as one and as many, the Paris of the poem is both a singular, specific space and many places over time. It is where the exile lives, “songer, penser, souffrir” (Hugo 27). As such, it is a dreamland, of which and from which dreams fly forth. “Le philosophe la distingue au fond de ses songes” (Hugo 51) while the poet dreams from within. It also occupies the space of memory, and the past. Hugo remembers it from his exile; the poet is alienated by its memory. Yet at the very same moment it is gratingly real and aggressively modern. The dreamscape includes the quotidian, as the African woman walks into the poet’s foggy musings. Her reality is inextricable from the modern, as she is the post-Industrial Revolution laborer, imported and isolated. Baudelaire’s Paris, imagined yet existing, vanished yet present, changes guise ceaselessly.

There is, as well, the question of origin. If exile is a removal from origin, Baudelaire’s Paris again appears in flux, acting as the seat of exile in paradoxical fashion. For the poem’s figures, life in Paris is life removed from its origin, life lived on foreign soil. It is the land to which they have been exiled. For Hugo, Paris is a place of origin, the city of light from which he has been banished and for which he yearns. It is also the birthplace and natural environment of the *flâneur*, who owes his existence to Parisian streets, a uniquely French verb, and Baron Haussmann. In an interesting aside, the primary renovation of Paris, during which the city transformed from a medieval to a modern capital, occurred exactly concurrently with the years of Hugo’s exile, between 1852 and 1870. Finally, Paris is home to *Le Cygne*’s poet, the ultimate exile, abandoned by time itself and feeling as foreign to the

city as the foreigners he observes. The poet, more than any other, fully inhabits the space of exile: the modern city, and Baudelaire's Paris.

The question of origin must be posed because of the essentiality of exile as a human condition. Agamben in particular is insistent upon the experience of abandonment as fundamental and inescapable. As discussed, his bare life is reminiscent of Hugo's bare law (*nudité du droit*). This sense of exile as bare essence is further visible in the fact that Hugo's essay and Baudelaire's poem showcase much the same experience. Sorrow, loss, suffering, displacement, yearning, nostalgia, and futility are the features of exile in both works. As Baudelaire's individuals are stripped bare, the same condition is exposed again and again, until the poet is forced into the generality "bien d'autres encore" (Line 52). And here Benjamin comes into play again, for this stripping down, this absolute exposure, is key to his understanding of Paris, the *flâneur*, and Baudelaire.

In his notes Benjamin remarks, "The new *desolation* of Paris is an essential moment in the image of modernity" (144). He thus views the modernized city as an urban desert, deprived of its identity, and it is this Paris, at once a metropolis and a wasteland, that the *flâneur* inhabits. Benjamin also offers the following definition: "The flâneur is someone abandoned in the crowd" (85). This formulation, articulated over sixty years before Agamben's work on homo sacer, lends further credence to the argument that abandonment is an essential characteristic of human relations while also grounding it firmly in the modern moment. Jennings argues that, for Benjamin,

"he [Baudelaire] is the modern individual who has, piece by piece, been stripped of the possessions and security of bourgeois life and forced to take refuge in the street. As the harried denizen of the warren of streets leading away from the elegance of the *grands boulevards*, Baudelaire is rendered defenseless against the shocks of modern

life. His heroism thus consists in his constant willingness to have the character of his age mark and scar his body... Heroism thus assumes the form of a mourning for a loss that has not yet occurred but always threatens- a Baudelairean notion that Benjamin places at the very center of his reading” (16).

The modern man, then, is he who experiences bare life and bare law in every facet of his daily existence. He is the always already exposed, the inside and outside of the crowd, the law, and the city.

It is this exposure to exile that *Le Cygne* showcases. To read the poem is to experience the *flâneur's* walk through Paris and to share in his absolute alienation as he is abandoned to the crowd. His exile is both physical and temporal, yet it is also located in a specific space and a particular moment. And while he sees reflections of himself in everyone who surrounds him, he is completely alone, in both his vision and his reality. This image, that of the solitary man adrift in an expanse and subject to every type of loss, is a recurrent one in the Western tradition. The exile has become a familiar figure, appearing under such guises as the Bible's Cain, Homer's Odysseus, Shakespeare's Prospero, and Coleridge's Mariner. A certain basic relation between exile and humanity is thus undeniable. However, in *Le Cygne*, situated as it is in Baudelaire's Paris and narrated by the figure of the *flâneur*-poet, the exile depicted is specifically an experience of modernity.

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